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AUTHOR Fisher, Peter J. L.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This study explored the nature of dictionary instruction in several basal reading series. Three basal reading series from major academic publishers (Scott Foresman, Ginn, and Holt) with 1989 copyrights, were selected for detailed analysis. Results indicated that even where the professed aim of the basal reading series was to incorporate dictionary use as a word learning strategy, nearly all the series treated it more as an isolated skill. (Two tables of data are included.) (RS)

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# Examining Dictionary Instruction in Basal Readers

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Peter J.L. Fisher
Diana M. Kent
Camille L.Z. Blachowicz

(National College of Education)

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While it is commonly agreed that vocabulary acquisition is an important part of school learning, it can be argued that direct instruction cannot account for all the vocabulary knowledge that is needed to succeed in school (Nagy et al, 1985). Some, if not most, of new vocabulary needs to be acquired independently by students. Independent word learning can happen in several ways. One way is through context, both by hearing language, and reading it. Aids, such as asking a knowledgeable source or consulting a dictionary, represent another.

The dictionary, then, is one possible source for independent word learning. Adults, obviously, only consult a dictionary when highly motivated to find the meaning of an unfamiliar word. School instruction may be aimed at helping children develop the skills necessary to use a dictionary effectively, but may also incorporate the dictionary in word learning. The two goals are not mutually exclusive. However, research on the vocabulary acquisition of children through dictionary use, though limited, points to this method as being minimally effective as part of school instruction. Carr and Wixson (1986) regard traditional methods of incorporating dictionary use in vocabulary learning, such as writing definitions or sentences to demonstrate undertanding of a word's meaning, as one of the weakest ways of learning new vocabulary. Duffelmeyer (1980) found students learned more when they were taught new vocabulary actively, rather than in more

traditional ways, including using the dictionary. Graves (1986) argues that while referring to a dictionary can teach students new words, it may only provide them with superficial understanding of the meanings. Such conclusions have been reinforced by a study by Casale and Manzo (1982) which compared a dictionary method with other methods. They found that affective and proprioceptive methods were more effective than a cognitive method of vocabulary learning employing dictionaries.

One line of research exploring why students are unable to use dictionaries more effectively has focused on the dictionaries themselves, and examined the ways in which definitions are difficult for children (Scott & Nagy, 1989), and how to make definitions more accessible to learners (McKeown, 1989). Another research line stems from the belief that students need to know what a definition is before they can understand definitions or define words themselves. Schwartz and Raphael (1985) have taught children a "concept of definition", where they learn not just how to find a word in a dictionary, but what the parts of a definition are, what kind of information they need to define a word, and how that information is organized. Blachowicz and Fisher (1989) probed this idea by examining ways in which children define different parts of speech, and concluded that it is not reasonable to expect a single schema to underpin a general defining strategy. What is clear is that if dictionaries are to be used effectively,

and dictionary instruction is to be meaningful, more information is needed concerning how students learn to use the dictionary, and how they are asked to apply their knowledge to the learning of words from the dictionary.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to explore the nature of dictionary instruction which students currently receive. This knowledge can then be used to help design more appropriate instruction, if it is needed. Teachers use three main sources for dictionary instruction in their classrooms: spelling books, language arts books, and basal readers. Informal interviews with teachers suggested that the nature of this instruction was similar in each source, so it was decided to examine more closely the instruction in basal readers (that resource being more readily available to us). Research has demonstrated that instruction recommended in basal readers parallels actual classroom instruction (Barr & Sadow, 1989), so it can be hypothesized that recommendations for dictionary instruction in these readers will impact on instructional practices.

The questions addressed by this study, therefore, related to the nature of dictionary instruction in recent basal reading series. More specifically they were:

1. How do basal readers teach the mechanics of dictionary use?

2. What is the nature of instruction recommended for

teachers when teaching how to use dictionary definitions?

3. What do basal readers require students to do when consulting a dictionary for the meaning of a word?

Three basal reading series from major publishers, and with 1989 copyright, were selected for detailed analysis. The publishers were Scott Foresman, Silver Burdett, Ginn (Ginn), and Holt, Rhinehart and Winston (Holt). We looked at the teacher's manuals for every grade level for each of these series. In addition selected lessons from the fourth grade level manuals from the series published by Open Court, Houghton-Mifflin, and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, were analyzed. Results for each question will be presented in order.

The Mechanics of Dictionary Use

Teaching students to find their way around a dictionary easily is obviously an important component in instruction, insofar as it will not only affect the willingness to use a dictionary, but also the ability to locate and utilize a correct meaning. One part of this skill is the use of guide words, and all the series placed some emphasis on developing this ability. However, there was no agreed level at which this skill was taught.

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Table 1 demonstrates that each of the three series analyzed in detail began instruction at a different point. The number of lessons in which the skill is taught at each level is also indicated, and the number of words used to teach and practice the skill is given as an indicator of the extent of instruction. Holt started their instruction at level 2 and completed it by the end of level 3(1). There was no further instruction or review for guide words evident after this. Ginn in contrast began instruction at level 3(2), emphasized it mainly at level 4, and continued review until level 7. Scott Foresman began at level 3(1), emphasized instruction at this level and levels 3(2) and 4, and continued review through level 8. In addition to these differences in the extent of the instruction, and the grade level at which it was emphasized, the nature of the instruction varied. While all three series had teacher directed lessons, Ginn used visual charts for instruction, with lessons based on that part of the dictionary page presented on the visual. However, both Ginn and Scott Foresman included games in their lesson plans for practicing this skill (usually for speed and accuracy) with a dictionary.

A prerequisite skill for the use of guide words is an understanding of alphabetical order. All the series incorporated this skill in early instruction, but alphabetical order is not regarded by these researchers as

part of dictionary instruction per se, and thus was not examined as part of this study.

The location of an appropriate meaning requires students to locate an appropriate entry, and thus to become adept at the mechanics of dictionary use. What is interesting to us, is that guide word instruction in all the series occurs at the same levels as instruction in finding meanings, but often occurs in separate lessons. Thus a typical exercise will ask students to decide between which of several pairs of guide words a particular entry word will occur. Even the games focus on speed of location, rather than the purpose of finding a word's meaning in the context of vocabulary learning or instruction. That is, guide word practice is not connected to the real purpose of dictionary use.

In relation to this, we were surprised at the amount of time the basals recommended spending on instruction in the use of the pronunciation key. Use of the key is complicated and, we suspect a rare event in practice, so its continued emphasis by many of the series at grades 3 through 6 might be considered inappropriate.

The Nature of Instruction

Scott Foresman was the only series which we examined that appeared to treat the use of a dictionary as one strategy in finding the meaning of unfamiliar words. The other series classified dictionary instruction under the

development of study or reference skills. From third grade onwards, Scott Foresman often taught students when it was appropriate to use the dictionary as part of several available strategies. In contrast, Ginn, for example, merely mentioned when it might be appropriate to use a dictionary, rather than provided actual practice when use of a dictionary might be, but was not necessarily, appropriate.

We considered modeling to be one instructional technique which was ideal for teaching how to get meanings from a dictionary. Each series was examined to determine whether modeling was recommended as an element of instruction. Scott Foresman and Ginn did suggest teachers use modeling techniques in some instances, but more frequently in these and other series a traditional lecture/explanation approach was utilized. In none of the manuals we saw was a wrong answer ever included in the instructional modeling to give students feedback on the process used to justify or discard a definition selection. Students can be made more aware of the process of finding a correct meaning if they are also exposed to how to deal with an initial identification of meaning which is incorrect. When much of dictionary instruction in finding definitions includes determining which meaning is appropriate among multiple definitions (see below), modeling how to deal with an incorrect choice would seem to be suitable.

In attempts to quantify the extent of the coverage given to dictionary instruction in locating word meaning in each of the series, we counted the number of lessons, the number of words presented in the lessons, and whether the words were presented as part of a teacher directed lesson or a workbook exercise [Table 2]. As might be expected, there was a large variation between series in the number of lessons on this topic.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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As with the guide word lessons, Holt emphasized this aspect in the early grades, while Ginn and Scott Foresman waited until grade 3. The number of lessons presented in Scott Foresman in using the dictionary to attain meaning was four times the number presented in either Holt or Ginn. Holt had no instruction at all in this area in grades 3 and 4, and minimal reinforcement in grades 5 and 6. Holt obviously places limited emphasis on dictionary instruction as part of the reading program and expects teachers to use alternate resources. Scott Foresman, as outlined above, advocates dictionary use as one component of vocabulary instruction. Ginn falls somewhere in between these two extremes. Despite the variation in coverage, it is still appropriate to study the nature of the suggested

instruction.

It was encouraging to note that all three series included more words in teacher directed lessons than as part of workbook exercises. Two further elements of instruction were also examined. One was the way in which words were presented and the other was the resource used to locate the definition. We identified whether the words were presented in context ( in a sentence or from the story) or in isolation. Presentation of the words in context would appear to be more ecologically valid. It also allows students to check to see whether their located definition is reasonable. Both Scott Foresman and Ginn presented a majority of their words in context, when locating meaning was the focus of the instruction.

The four main places that students could use to find a definition were a dictionary, a glossary, workbook pages, or a teacher chart. Our examination of these sources of definitions showed that artificial dictionary pages either on workbook pages or teacher charts were an important part of instruction for Holt and Ginn. While the use of teacher charts might promote better teacher-student interaction, there is no reason that workbook pages can not be used in conjunction with the dictionary or glossary.

In summary, the two series which seemed to regard dictionary instruction as part of the reading program, and an important component in identifying unfamiliar words' meanings, both suggested the teacher use modeling

techniques, incorporated more teacher directed instruction than workbook exercises, generally presented the words for lessons in sentence contexts, and often used an actual dictionary or glossary in instruction. In this last respect, Scott Foresman was better than Holt. This instruction often appeared to be appropriate, but a closer examination was needed as to what students are required to do once a word's definition has been located.

Use of the Definition

Normal use of dictionaries includes, among other purposes, locating a meaning of an unfamiliar word from reading, and to check the meaning of a word used in writing. Similarly, students are required as part of dictionary instruction to use definitions for both receptive and productive purposes. The three most common tasks we identified were: 1. Simply producing a definition, 2. Distinguishing between multiple meanings , and 3. Use of the word in an appropriate sentence [Table 2]. Holt and Scott Foresman emphasized the first task while Ginn placed more emphasis on the second. It appears to us that simply locating the definition, with little instruction as to what to do next, does not place dictionary use in a meaningful context. Thus while espousing the use of dictionaries as part of vocabulary learning, in reality Scott Foresman apparently places more emphasis on locating definitions as an isolated skill.

In passing it is interesting to note a minor variation in the use of a definition. All three series, although only minimally, requested that students locate an entry word by working backwards from the definition. We were pleased to note how infrequently this task occurred, since it seems have no relationship to actual dictionary use, and might even encourage an inappropriate strategy.

## Conclusions

When students use a dictionary to locate the meaning of an unfamiliar word, they normally do so within a purposeful context. That is, the use of a dictionary is just one strategy to determine a meaning. For us, it seems appropriate to place dictionary instruction within the context of learning a variety of strategies to determine word meaning, such as use of sentence context, domain context, asking a reliable source (Mom, Dad, or teacher), or using a variety of reference materials. Further, practice in dictionary use as a strategy, and vocabulary learning, are not mutually exclusive as part of instruction. Our analysis of basal reading materials has suggested that even where the professed aim is to incorporate dictionary use as a word learning strategy, nearly all the series we examined in fact treated it more as an isolated skill.

The instruction we saw recommended was not inappropriate for the necessary mechanics of dictionary

use, nor was the nature of the recommended instructional procedures in teaching how to locate definitions. We recognize that basal readers are only one source of instruction, but they are a major source along with spelling books and language arts texts. If, as we argue, the nature of the instruction is similar for all sources, then it may be that while a skill is being developed in our classrooms, its application to vocabulary acquisition needs more attention.

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Table 1. Number of lessons (A), words (B), and workbook items (C), used to teach guide words in three basal reading series.

| LEVEL | HOLT | | | SCOTT FORESMAN | | | GINN | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | A | B | C | A | B | C | A | B | C |
| 2(1) | 1 | 3 | 6 | | | | | | |
| 2(2) | 7 | 42 | 29 | | | | | | |
| 3(1) | 1 | 6 | - | 8 | 30 | 15 | | | |
| 3(2) | | | | 9 | 19 | 1 | 4 | 9 | 12 |
| 4 | | | | 5 | 11 | 3 | 5 | 31 | 14 |
| 5 | | | | 4 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 13 | 6 |
| 6 | | | | 3 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 17 | - |
| 7 | | | | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 4 | - |
| 8 | | | | 1 | - | - | | | |
| TOTALS | 9 | 51 | 35 | 33 | 70 | 25 | 18 | 74 | 22 |

Table 2. The number of lessons and words used to teach dictionary definitions in three basal reading series.

| SERIES | LEVEL | NO. OF LESSONS | NO. OF WORDS | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Teacher Directed | Workbook | In Context | Isolation | REFERENCE | | | | USE | | | | TOTAL |
| | | | | | | | A | B | C | D | A | B | C | D | |
| HOLT | 1(2) | 8 | 25 | 9 | 7 | 27 | 11 | - | 10 | 13 | 25 | 1 | 6 | 8 | 34 |
| | 2 | 3 | 5 | 4 | - | 9 | 3 | 2 | - | 5 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 9 |
| | 3/4 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| | 5 | 5 | 10 | 6 | 8 | 8 | 7 | - | 3 | 6 | 7 | 9 | 6 | - | 16 |
| | 6 | 2 | 1 | 1 | - | 2 | - | - | - | 2 | - | - | 2 | - | 2 |
| | TOTAL | 18 | 41 | 20 | 15 | 46 | 21 | 2 | 13 | 26 | 37 | 13 | 18 | 9 | 61 |
| GINN | 3(2) | 4 | 8 | 10 | 13 | 5 | 4 | - | 4 | 10 | 3 | 3 | 11 | 1 | 18 |
| | 4 | 6 | 8 | 17 | 21 | 4 | 1 | - | 7 | 17 | 2 | 8 | 14 | 1 | 25 |
| | 5 | 4 | 14 | 10 | 12 | 12 | - | - | 16 | 8 | 1 | - | 21 | 2 | 24 |
| | 6 | 5 | 13 | 12 | 24 | 1 | 2 | - | 11 | 12 | 9 | - | 16 | - | 25 |
| | 7 | 2 | 10 | 5 | 2 | 13 | 1 | - | 9 | 5 | 11 | - | 4 | - | 15 |
| | 8 | 1 | 20 | - | 20 | - | - | - | 20 | - | - | 20 | - | - | 20 |
| | TOTAL | 22 | 73 | 54 | 92 | 35 | 8 | - | 67 | 52 | 26 | 31 | 66 | 4 | 127 |
| SCOTT F'MAN | 3 | 16 | 38 | 19 | 17 | 40 | - | 40 | 8 | 9 | 42 | 9 | 6 | - | 57 |
| | 4 | 16 | 25 | 20 | 37 | 8 | - | 33 | - | 12 | 22 | - | 23 | - | 45 |
| | 5 | 9 | 14 | 16 | 25 | 5 | - | 14 | - | 16 | 21 | - | 22 | - | 30 |
| | 6 | 14 | 35 | 20 | 47 | 8 | - | 36 | 3 | 16 | 38 | 9 | 26 | 2 | 55 |
| | 7 | 20 | 71 | 26 | 59 | 38 | - | 58 | 30 | 9 | 78 | 7 | 12 | - | 97 |
| | 8 | 10 | 32 | 29 | 43 | 18 | 5 | 49 | - | 7 | 39 | 6 | 16 | - | 61 |
| | TOTAL | 86 | 215 | 130 | 228 | 117 | 5 | 230 | 41 | 69 | 240 | 31 | 105 | 2 | 345 |

REFERENCE (FOR THE DEFINITION)
- A = Teaching chart
- B = Glossary
- C = Dictionary
- D = Workbook page or similar

USE (OF THE DEFINITION)
- A = Give the definition
- B = Use it in a sentence
- C = Detemine an appropriate meaning from multiple definitions
- D = Work from a definition to an entry word